

June 17, 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

This coming July 25th, the Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Sunday and holy day Mass obligation will be restored in the Des Moines Diocese. It was a profoundly sobering decision to suspend public Masses and the Sunday obligation over a year ago, and throughout this pandemic I know we have all longed for a more ordinary rhythm in our life of faith and communal worship. Reinstating the Sunday obligation is an encouraging step forward; it is being taken in response to a much improved public health situation, and the widespread accessibility of effective vaccines against COVID-19.

We have all experienced times when an unchosen period of absence has helped us to more deeply appreciate the many gifts in our lives, and my hope is that the same will be true in our experience of Sunday Eucharist and the obligation that points the way toward shared presence with Jesus and one another. Our society often views obligations as burdens to be endured or obstacles to freedom. A healthier “human ecology” recognizes that obligations can often orient us toward the good, especially if we are mixed in our dispositions toward that good. I hope that the restoration of the Sunday obligation will give us all an opportunity to reflect on the marvelous generosity of the “One who alone is good” (see Mark 10:18), yet whose goodness is instilled in everything in this world in which we live, move, and have our being.

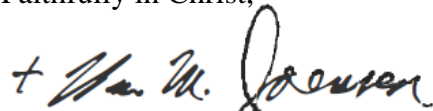
Fundamentally, our participation in communal worship on Sundays and holy days is both an entry into, and an expression of, an intimate personal relationship with Jesus. This intimacy is the transforming experience that gives life “a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*/God is Love n. 1). We are invited to worship God who has gratuitously given us everything we have, including life itself. Further, the Mass draws us ever more deeply into the communal Body of Christ, the People of God whom Jesus calls and redeems. Our participation in Mass is not a supplemental practice in the life of discipleship; it is the beating heart of faith, the source and summit of our entire Christian life. If you have been away from Mass, whether due to the pandemic or for any other reason, I’d like to personally invite you to join us again at the wellspring of God’s love.

While the general dispensation from the obligation will be lifted on July 25th, there will always be cases where individuals are excused or dispensed for serious reasons (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 2181). These reasons would include, but are not limited to, personal illness, known or suspected exposure to COVID-19, or if you are a caretaker of a member of the vulnerable population and your participation in Mass would expose him or her to a significant risk of contracting COVID-19. If you are unsure of your situation, please consult with your pastor who can assist you in your discernment.

On July 25th, the Gospel at Mass will recount Jesus' feeding the 5,000, and in the following weeks we will hear successive passages from the John 6 account of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse. As we prepare for the reinstatement of the Sunday obligation, please join me in praying for a greater awareness of, and attraction to, Jesus as the Bread of Life. Jesus nourishes and sustains us in all seasons of life. May we grow in our appreciation of Mass, and in our observance of Sunday itself, a day of rest and feasting "which heals our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world... the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality" (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*/On Care for Our Common Home n. 237).

Let us continue to pray for Eucharistic Renewal, in our own Diocese and in the world. Please know of my prayers for you and all your loved ones. May you receive the blessing Jesus promises to those who Eucharistic hunger inspires all they do: "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6).

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "W. M. Joensen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. William M. Joensen, Ph.D.
Bishop of Des Moines